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ABSTRACT

Little specific information exists on the number of school counselors needed in the United States for the next five to ten years. To gauge this need, the results of a 1996-1997 survey of all state-level departments of education are reported here. Information concerning the employment future for school counselors nation-wide is also offered, as are the results of a district-wide survey conducted in Virginia. The one-page survey for this study was mailed to the chief certification officer of the state department of education for each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Results based on 39 returned surveys indicate that no accurate pool of information about the numbers of school counselors needed in the next 5 to 10 years seems to exist and few state departments of education have procedures in place to assess this need. Apparently, trends in some states, such as budget constraints and reductions in staff support positions, could decrease the number of counselors needed in the next several years. However, trends are also evident which may favorably affect employment opportunities of school counselors, such as increased funding for school counseling positions and legislative efforts to require elementary counselors. Implications and recommendations are provided. (RJM)

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A NATIONAL SURVEY OF FUTURE NEED FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS

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A NATIONAL SURVEY OF FUTURE NEED FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS

Very little specific information exists on the numbers of school counselors needed in each state for the next 5 to 10 years. Many people need this information:

-- counselor educators preparing graduate students to be school counselors;

-- school counselors wishing to relocate to another part of the country or to another level of schooling;

-- school counselors discussing career plans with their middle and high school students;

-- state licensing authorities deciding whether to change credentialing standards to enable more people to enter the profession;

-- state councils of higher education deciding whether to allow start-up of a new university program in school counseling;

-- graduate students wanting to know employment prospects at the conclusion of their graduate program.

This study reports results of a 1996-97 survey of all state-level departments of education in the United States to determine whether data on projected needs for school counselors are available for that state, as well as other information relative to employment future for school counselors nation-wide. The article also relates results from a district-by-district survey conducted in Virginia two years ago to answer similar questions. The Virginia survey also asked questions about quality of applicants

of applicants and quality of service of recently hired school counselors and is presented as a model of the type of survey which can collect information within a state.

A search of the literature yielded a small amount of information. An ERIC document (Scheetz, 1995) reported on a survey of 294 elementary and secondary school systems throughout the United States. Guidance counselors were listed as among the hardest positions to fill, but no specific numbers were included on how many positions might be available. An Oregon survey of superintendents and assistant superintendents (Oregon State Board of Education, 1992) noted that the applicant pool appeared to be adequate for teachers and administrators but that the counseling applicant pool is "troubling" for some districts. One wonders whether the quality or the numbers of applicants, or both, were inadequate. The Career Center of the University of Missouri (1994) noted that employment of counselors is likely to grow faster than for all occupations through the year 2000, often resulting from replacement needs, with the employment outlook for counselors "stable." The web site for the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1997) reports that employment of school counselors is expected to increase due to increases in student enrollment and state legislation requiring elementary counselors in some states. The caution is added, however, that "employment growth may be dampened by budgetary constraints ... counselor positions are usually cut before teacher positions when funding is tight." However, no projections of

numbers for school counselors are offered

THE NATIONWIDE SURVEY

Finding no satisfactory answer to the question of how many school counselors will be needed in the next 5 to 10 years in the literature, and knowing that no such data existed in Virginia, the author decided to survey all states to see whether such information was being collected.

The Survey

In the fall of 1995, a one-page survey was mailed to the chief certification officer of the state department of education for each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia, a total of 51 surveys. The person receiving the survey was the contact person listed in Tryneski's (1993) *Requirements for Certification of Teachers, Counselors, Librarians, Administrators for Elementary and Secondary Schools.* Our request was that the person either fill out the survey or pass it to a more appropriate individual in that state's department of education. Those states not responding initially received a second survey in the summer of 1996.

The survey was a simple one-page form which asked the name, job title, address and phone number of the person who completed it; whether or not the state collects data on the number of school counselors needed for the next 5 to 10 years; and if so, projected numbers of vacancies in elementary, middle, and high schools. Respondents were asked for any other source of these data in their states, if the state department of education was not the correct

source. Other questions on the survey asked for mandated staffing ratios, if they existed, and levels of school for which counselors are required in that state. The survey queried whether teaching or other work experience is required for certification and asked for trends currently underway in that state which would affect employment of counselors. The last question asked whether there seemed to be an adequate supply of applicants for school counseling jobs in that state.

Results of the Survey

Of the 51 entities surveyed, 39 states responded, for a 77% return rate (Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming). All information reported below will be on the basis of these 39 states, and percentages refer to portions of this 39-state group.

Most surveys (74%) were returned by certification specialists, or else there was no position designated in the information section. Ten surveys (26%) were completed by someone identified as a guidance specialist in the state department of education.

Only four states (Hawaii, Missouri, South Dakota, and Wisconsin) responded that they had estimates for the numbers of

counselors needed for the next 5 to 10 years. Idaho projects vacancies for three years in the future. Thus, only 13% of the state departments of education reported projecting vacancies for school counselors for 3 to 10 years in the future. Of these five states, only one (Missouri) reported projecting vacancies by elementary, middle/junior high, and high school positions. Wisconsin has a detailed projection for educational supply and demand prepared by researchers at the University of Wisconsin - Whitewater (Lauritzen and Friedman, 1994).

The Connecticut Department of Education generates a Fall Hiring Report which lists total vacancies (positions available), median applications per vacancy, and number of people receiving initial certification in that year (Connecticut Department of Education, 1995). This report computes a Teacher Shortage Index, which lists school counselors at an index of 96.5 for 1995-96; 84 for 1994-95; and 61 for 1993-94. Thus, while an adequate supply existed in 1995-96, the index indicates a three-year trend toward less oversupply.

Most forms (74%) had no response to the request to "Please list any other source of this data in your state." Seven respondents said the data are collected at the district level and we should contact individual school districts. One state believes the professional counseling associations may have the data; one referred us to the universities that prepare counselors and another, to the state occupational information system.

The answers to questions on the survey relating to levels of

schooling at which counselors must be employed and mandated staffing ratios, if any, were confusing. Several states left the questions blank, and some sent state regulations that were difficult for the researcher to interpret without more background information. For example, one state requires an elementary guidance program but noted that it can be accomplished by teachers. Two states commented that counselors are not mandated but full funding cannot be achieved unless counselors are in place. Several states noted that accrediting association regulations served as mandates for their schools. Of the states completing these questions, 12 reported requiring elementary counselors; 16, middle/junior high counselors; and 18, high school counselors. Only four states reported elementary staffing ratios mandated, ranging from 1/300 (Hawaii) to 1/500 (Virginia). Middle/junior high ratios (four states reporting) ranged from 1/300 (Missouri) to 1/400 (Alabama and Virginia). High school ratios (five states reporting) ranged from 1/350 (Virginia) to 1/500 (Missouri).

Of the 39 states reporting, 14 (36%) require teaching experience for school counselors; two states will substitute other work experience, and two states require other work experience for vocational or career counselors. No teaching experience is required in 17 of the states (44%). Randolph and Spence (1994) reported that 29 states do not require teaching experience for endorsing school counselors.

Half of the states which answered the question on adequacy of

number of applicants reported that there generally seems to be an adequate supply of school counselor applicants for their vacancies; 44% reported an inadequate supply. Two states (North Carolina and Virginia) noted an inadequate supply in rural areas: "Smaller systems are hiring students who have not even finished a degree." South Carolina spoke for many states, no doubt, with, "We really need more minority applicants." Hawaii noted that adequacy of supply of applicants depends greatly on graduation rates from universities: "Depending on the size of each year's graduating class from our local universities, we may have adequate supply or shortage." A recent Virginia study (Vaught, 1996) noted less adequate supply of applicants in areas most remote from universities which graduate school counselors.

THE VIRGINIA SURVEY

A survey in the fall of 1994 of the 135 school systems in Virginia gathered data useful for those preparing school counselors and for school counselors seeking new jobs (Vaught, 1996). No data could be found at the state level to predict the number of counselors needed in the coming years, nor information about the quality of preparation of school counselors hired within the past five years.

A commonly heard statement is that many teachers have counseling endorsement and are waiting to step into future counselor vacancies. Knowing that holding certification does not by itself qualify a candidate for a job, the author also wanted to know how many current employees school administrators and

supervisors considered logical candidates for system vacancies for school counseling.

No published data could be found to reveal the level of satisfaction of school systems regarding preparation of counselors hired within the past five years. Myths abound about teachers escaping the classroom into counseling offices; coffee-drinking paper-shufflers who do not work with children; and counselors who counsel only those going to college. The survey gave central office supervisors the chance to comment on quality of recently hired counselors and to tell professors whatever they wanted about preparation of future counselors.

The Survey

Persons designated as being responsible for counseling or pupil personnel services in the 135 school systems in Virginia received a one-page survey in the fall of 1994. Three-fourths (77% or 104 school systems) returned the survey form. From some regions of the state, the return rate was as high as 93%. Survey respondents were directors or supervisors of guidance or pupil services; directors or assistant superintendents of instruction; or superintendents of school systems.

The brief survey consisted of three parts. In the first section, respondents projected the number of new counselors needed in their system for elementary, middle, and high school in two, five, and ten years. The item read:

Please estimate the number of school counselors your division will need, either new positions or

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replacements for retirement or attrition, for the next several years, assuming the current standards for staffing (maximum 500/1 for elementary, 400/1 for middle, 350/1 for high school) remain in effect. We are trying to estimate the number of vacancies in two, five, and ten years.

Respondents also answered this question:

How many currently employed teachers with counseling certification do you estimate you have at present whom you would consider employing as counselors?

Thus, part one of the survey requested numerical projections designed to help counselor educators know how many and what kind of counselors would be needed in the next ten years in Virginia.

The second set of responses used a Likert-type scale of 1 (low) to 4 (high), with a NA response, to indicate satisfaction with:

Number of applicants available

Academic preparation of applicants

Previous experience of applicants.

Space provided allowed for comments on these three items.

The third part of the survey form requested responses on two open-ended questions:

Please comment on the quality of the school counselors you have hired in the past five years.

What else would you like to tell us at Virginia Tech about the preparation of school counselors?

The second and third parts of the questionnaire sought information on the quality of the applicants, as well as satisfaction with the size of the applicant pool.

The Results

Estimating conservatively, assuming the same staffing standards stay in place, Virginia will need over 1100 school counselors within the next ten years. Fewer than one-fourth of those positions, central office administrators estimate, are likely to be filled with currently-employed teachers already endorsed as school counselors. In this survey, most school systems reported few if any teachers waiting in the wings for school counseling positions. Several large school systems which have nearby university preparation programs have applicants ready and waiting already in their employment, but most do not. The supposition that many teachers are prepared and waiting to become school counselors appears to be a myth, at least in Virginia.

More high school counselors (38% of new hires), followed by elementary (34%), and then middle (28%) will be required. These proportions are predictable, given that the staffing ratios are lower in high school in Virginia, requiring more counselors proportionally than for elementary and middle schools. Also, counselors in elementary and middle school as a group were more recently hired, predicting more retirements from the ranks of high school counseling within the next ten years. The higher number of elementary counselors than middle is logical, given the enrollment increases in lower grades. Also, most elementary schools house

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five or six grades of students, and most middle schools, three or four.

Only a small number (17%) of school systems found a high level of satisfaction with the numbers of applicants available, and all of those were adjacent to universities which graduate school counselors. Over one-third of school systems reported low to fair satisfaction with the size of the applicant pool; those with lowest satisfaction were most distant from universities with counselor preparation programs. Comments included statements such as "Too few good ones" and "almost no males." One system noted, "elementary fine, high school lean" and another, "need more secondary and minority;" yet another wrote, "especially low elementary."

Academic preparation of prospective counselors received a fairly high degree of satisfaction, 3.1 on a 4.0 scale. No lapses in training emerged as a group concern. However, individuals cited specific training needs: "don't know much about interpretation of standardized test scores" and "middle school knowledgeable applicants are needed and scarce." One noted, "middle and high lack preparation in career education" while another wrote, "The counselors hired in the past five years have been better prepared for vocational and career counseling and for working with at-risk students than previously. They have not been better prepared in academic subject areas and study skills." Overall, academic preparation of prospective counselors was not a concern of administrators who hired them; they rated it well and

made few additional suggestions on the survey.

Administrators and supervisors were less satisfied with the experience of applicants presenting themselves for hire, rating it 2.9 on a 4.0 scale. One respondent lamented, "Few have had background with rural populations." Several made comments such as, "Well-prepared theoretically; lack experience and professional judgment" and, from a supervisor of counselors, "A little more **reality** would help." Many noted the need for teaching experience (not a requirement for licensure in Virginia).

Almost all of the comments about overall quality of new hires and applicants in the past five years were positive; most were exceptional: "excellent," "very highly qualified,""very good success with seasoned and new counselors,""dedicated and enthusiastic,""highly capable of performing their assigned duties."

One noted, "Improved over the past five years" and another, "It is evident that school counselors have received better training in the past few years." One respondent mentioned the need for more variety in training institutions, without elaborating on what kind of variety -- an interesting comment in a state with preparation programs ranging from state universities to fundamental Christian universities.

Only four negative comments on the overall quality of applicants occurred, out of 104 responses (4%). The few negative comments came from the most rural school systems, and those farthest from universities preparing counselors. One wonders

whether their applicant pool might have been weaker than other areas: "The quantity and quality has been so unsatisfactory, the county is presently paying the cost to send employed staff back to college to become certified." Another wrote, "We have hired two counselors [in the past five years]. One is a 'cold fish' to whom children are not attracted. The other had not taught -- a definite handicap." One rural system administrator said, "Last three available positions were filled with unendorsed personnel simply because no applicants were endorsed. Hired as teachers and took classes to become endorsed."

Conclusions

Based on the returned surveys from 39 states, these conclusions emerge from the data.

1. There appears to be no accurate pool of information in existence about the numbers of school counselors needed in the next 5 to 10 years for the nation's elementary, middle, and high schools.

2. Few state departments of education or other organizations within states have procedures in place to capture data about school counselor job projections.

3. If universities which prepare future counselors are doing projections of employment trends for their graduates, state departments of education are apparently unaware of those studies or estimates. Only three states of the 39 responding mentioned universities as a possible source of the information.

4. One state, Connecticut, does a projection which takes into

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account the number of vacancies, the number of applicants for the vacancies, and the number of school counselors receiving initial certification. These numbers are combined to derive an index of supply and demand.

5. Many trends are occurring in states which could decrease the number of counselors needed in the next several years. Among those noted by respondents are changes in an external accrediting association's requirements; attacks on elementary counseling from conservative groups; budget constraints; legislation allowing other professionals to fulfill school counselors' jobs (school social workers); reduction in staff support positions; and delegation to local school districts the decision about whether or not to hire school counselors.

6. Trends which may favorably affect employment opportunities of school counselors include: increased funding for school counseling positions; legislative efforts to require elementary counselors; Safe Schools and other school reform movements; increased enrollment in elementary grades; increased school enrollments in some states due to population migration; Tech Prep and School-to-Work Transition; and retirement of many veteran school counselors.

Several states indicated that, although counseling is not mandated for schools, more school systems are choosing to increase the number of school counselors.

7. In about half the states reporting, counselor applicant supply is adequate; in about half, it is not.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are important implications of this study for counselor educators who prepare counselors; school districts which hire them; school, university, and mental health counselors who help people plan careers; and professional associations which serve school counselors.

1. A national data base of projected school counselor needs and vacancies would be very helpful to all of the groups mentioned above. One way to achieve this would be for an individual, the department of education, a university, or the state counselors' association to conduct a survey in each state similar to the Virginia survey described above. A national agency or an organization such as the American School Counselors Association (ASCA) could compile the data periodically.

2. If such a data base were compiled, it could easily be made accessible immediately to all through the internet.

3. Research surveys of state and national trends likely to affect employment of school counselors should continue to be published periodically in publications of interest to school counselors. ASCA and state organization lobbying efforts are the best example of the importance of keeping up with these trends.

4. University professors should be aware of not only their own state's need for school counselors, but also where shortages and oversupplies occur, to be able to advise their graduates accurately.

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